

# **The Up Down *Scholars***



**a story by Brooks Kohler**

FADE IN:

EXT. DINER – DAY

Midsummer – Interstate diner somewhere near the border of Kansas City and the hinterland at 5:21 A.M. on a Sunday with birds chirping and tires humming in the distance. This place is stuck in the 1970s.

“You know those cars you pass on the highway, the ones you laugh at in the slow lane going the legal speed. Well, I’m one of those. I’m one of those grannies, those individuals who don’t know where the gas pedal is, that thorn in your trip, that pain in your hip, that curse between your lips. It is what I do, and I do it well. If I had a motto it would be overnight and outta sight. Yeah, that’s right, but then again I ramble, when I’m sleepy.”

“Name’s, Frank. Pass the sugar.”

We were seated at the counter of the small, off the road diner near I-70 close to the Kansas/Missouri border. I had been coming and going since I sat down and waking up only long enough to raise my head to take in my surroundings.

Frank, was a sandy haired, maverick type truck driver in his early thirties who had wandered in while I was out and had taken the stool beside me. He was from Oklahoma and was passing through Kansas with a load of rotten potatoes destined for a hog farm near Memphis. He looked like something out of a B movie where the man meets up with the girls on a cross country trip. Frank had an unshaved neck, silver eyes on a tanned face, a truck stop hat with a greasy brim, blue jeans, boots, and a lime green t-shirt with a breast pocket where he stuffed his crumpled pack of cigarettes. When he sat down next to me, he was on his cell, talking loudly and gruff. He immediately ordered a cup of coffee and began to give me the occasional once over.

I had woken up, and Frank was digging for a smoke. The waitress walked by, and tapped the counter. She pointed, and Frank looked up. "You can't smoke in this place," he muttered. My eyes darted toward the sign displaying the crossed out cigarette. "You can't smoke anywhere, anymore!"

He looked around the room in that way that people do when they hope somebody important is sitting nearby to hear their prophetic message, but they were not. It was just me, Frank, the waitress, and few locals who probably agreed.

"You can in Colorado," I said.

He turned to me with an evil eye.

"Are we in Colorado?"

"No."

"Then shut up!"

I did and Frank reposition himself on his stool. He plucked a toothpick out of a box and tossed it into his mouth where bounced between his lips.

"So where you headin', Denver?"

"St. Louis."

“Hate that town. Too many cops and too much construction.” He wiggled in his seat as if he were attempting to grind a hemorrhoid. “I’d just as soon as have a hot poker shoved my pimped butt than go into St. Louis.”

It was obvious by his choice of words that his life had been harder than most. Sleep deprivation will do that to a person, make them cranky and older in spirit than they really are. One moment your slumping forward behind the wheel and the next your jerking your neck in a frantic spasm to keep awake.

“You got a name?” asked Frank.

“Aaron.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

“Really? You look older than that.”

“Yeah, I’ll be twenty-one in March.”

“I got a boy almost thirteen. He’s not mine. Came with the package if you know what I mean.”

Frank paused for a thought and chewed on his toothpick.

Searching for an escape, I placed my head down. The waitress, with a bitter tone came over and tapped the counter bringing me back to life. "If you need a bed, there's one down the street. You can't sleep in here."

"Boy, you did it now," commented Frank. "Ticked off the queen."

Her name tag displayed the name Ellen. My thoughts were instantly taken back to a grade school teacher by the same name.

"Somebody needs to come into this town and clean it up!" shouted Frank. "You got drunks and hookers all over the place, but a man can't smoke!"

"Town don't care if you smoke mister," said a low voice in the background. "I got emphysema."

Frank spun around. He took off his hat and patriotically placed it to his chest. "Sorry to hear that. My dad had it."

"Well, you'll have it too if you don't give up them worthless things," added another.

By this time, I was trying my best to figure out my next move. Part of my senses were returning to

me, the part that tells one when to leave. Taking out my cellphone, I began to scroll through my text messages. Travis had sent me three messages in a row. I was preparing to open the first when Frank interrupted by throwing his phone into my face.

“Hey, take a look at this. What do you think of that?”

The image was blurred, but it was clearly not legal. Frank began to laugh like a man who discovered the gold in the kitchen sink.

Nauseated, I stood up and stretched. “I need to be going.”

A look of surprise blossomed on his baked face. “We’ve not even had breakfast. You can’t just leave!”

“Can and must. I need to get on the road.”

INT. RESTAURANT - 1:31 P.M.

“He looks tired.”

“He should be. He drove all night.”

Travis was adamant that I meet him at a

restaurant. As an added bonus, he brought an attractive blonde he had spent the night with. Seated in a booth they chitchatted me down.

“Travis says you’re studying to be an accountant.”

“Hotel business management,” I corrected.

“That’s my minor,” said the blonde. “I mean, accounting. I’m hoping to get into the FBI when I graduate.”

If my stare was a dagger, it would have been planted in her forehead.

Travis intervened. “She’s one of those,” he said. “Crazy about the government.”

She scrunched her face into a 1980s cliché movie scene where the ditzy girl does the cute thing of tightening her shoulders and wiggling in her seat all the while making little noises that were more annoying than seductive. The only thing missing was the spandex and primped hair.

“Sounds great. Travis, could I speak with you?”

Excusing myself, I meandered to the



restroom where upon entering with vulgarity on my lips a very short man hit my leg as he exited and caused me to flinch. It must have frightened him as much as it did me, because as quickly as I zoomed to the safety of the urinals, the wee little man vanished into the shadows of the restaurant.

“You need to see this.” Travis burst through the door. “There’s a midget out there who looks like an Oompa Loompa!”

“Does she know?”

“Yeah, he’s right by our booth. You have to see this! I almost gave the guy a tip.” Travis took the urinal beside me. Lucky for him there was no divider. This served him well because he had a strange fascination with my penis which he enjoyed reminding me was rather small. “You really should have a doctor look at that. I bet you’re some anatomical freak of nature and might score big with an entitlement grant or disability.”

“Is everything a joke?”

“When you can brag, yes.” He continued to razz. “I bet that midget has a sister.”

I zipped up and walked to the sink.

“I could fix you up.” Travis walked up beside me and began to check his hair in the mirror. “You know, there’s no reason to feel bad. I once saw a porno where the midget was so big, he could pogo on it.”

I failed to find humor in what he was saying and Travis got quiet.

“If she causes any problems, we’ll take her on a trip,” he said.

Instantly, our eyes met. His smile dropped. The next sound I heard was the crescendo of people talking as Travis opened the door and ventured back out to our booth.

A dread came over me, and I was reminded of Frank and the picture on his cell phone, and in my mind I could see the face of the man I killed the night before. Looking up, I saw my pasty face in the mirror. Frank was right. I did look older than twenty.

EXT. PARKING LOT – 1:54 P.M.

What Travis had taken to be a trophy turned out to be a transient swindler. By the time he returned to the booth, she was gone, along with his wallet and the credit card he had left behind and stupidly exposed. He was pacing.

“Report it stolen,” I said.

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Cause it’s already stolen!”

“So it’s not linked to you.”

Travis rolled his eyes, and then I knew.

A few months prior he had acquired a device for making fraudulent credit cards by making a duplicate card and reauthoring it. The cards worked, but left behind deep in the metadata was the name of the original owner. For this reason, Travis had been told not to use the machine, but curiosity killed the cat, and Travis was the cat. Now, when he looked at me with eyes forlorn, I knew why. He used the machine to make the card his date had stolen, and if that card was found and given to

the police, they could scan it and trace it back to him.

Pulling out my cell phone, I began to search for a number.

“Who you calling?”

“Royce.”

“Who’s Royce?”

“A guy I met.”

“A guy you met or a guy you know?”

“Both.”

“Both?”

“Yeah, both.”

I dialed the number. Travis turned away from me and then spun back around to challenge me. “What’s up with the secrecy?” he asked.

I held up my hand to pause him. The phone was ringing, but there was no answer. I ended the call.

“That’s the way things are,” I said.

“The way? I’m looking at 5 years in prison minimum, and that’s the way things are?”

“Relax. I know where he lives, but first I’ll

need to do one thing.”

INT. CAR - 2:27 P.M.

“I feel like a hostage,” said Travis.

He was beside me in the car wearing his sock for a blindfold. We were heading south out of St. Louis on Interstate 55 to an undisclosed location known as Royce’s House. All that was known about Royce was that he was a former professor who taught computer programming at an Ivy League University in the northeast and had lost his illustrious career over a scandal involving an untraceable offshore website that was only learned about when a student who received a poor grade turned him in. A fugitive, Royce jumped the fence and would only make himself known to people he thought had as much to lose as himself. Even the number I was given to call on his services was supposedly an untraceable fake and that number was given me by my employer.

“There is a warrant out for him in Europe,” I

commented. "Last he checked, it was going to Interpol."

"What's he do for money?" asked Travis.

"Not sure. He ran some website or something."

"You mean you don't even know what this person does for money?"

"Nope."

Ahead of us was a metro-cop shooting radar. I tapped the breaks.

"What was that?"

"Cop."

"You hit a cop?"

"No, a cop was parked on the side of the road, and now it appears he is pulling out and is behind us." Travis began to dig into his pocket.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I got something in here."

"I'm pulling over."

"No wait!"

He pulled his hand from his pocket and presented a small plastic bottle containing a series

of mismatched colored pills. “Think I should pitch it?”

“Can you eat them without dying?” While Travis tried to make a decision, the cop turned on his cherries. “I’m pulling over.”

The car veered and came to a slow park.

“What about these?” continued Travis.

I checked the side mirror. The cop was busy.

“Shove them down in the seat.”

“The seat?”

I turned and yanked the blindfold off him.

“The seat! Do it now while we have a chance.”

“Why the seat? Why not the glove box?”

“Why not your butt?” Travis fumbled with the bottle. “Hurry up!”

“There’s not really a place here.”

“Find one!”

“I’m trying, alright!”

“You know if you weren’t so stupid...” Travis leaned forward and peered around me. “What?”

“He’s at the window.”

I turned and the cop, in dark sunglasses, had

his nose just inches from the glass. "Roll it down."

Following the order, I pressed the button, and the window lowered. "Hi, officer."

He raised his hand and cut me off. "I need to consult your passenger. How are you today, sir?"

"Okay," replied Travis.

"That's good. That's real good to hear. Do you have a medical condition I should know about, sir?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's good to hear, but the reason I ask is because I couldn't help but notice that you were trying to conveniently place your pill bottle in a place that it would be safe during this inquiry about your friend's driving, and I would hate for you to need your medication while I conduct my investigation."

A person who encounters authority does a peculiar thing. They become an instant con-artist. Even if they are sure they were doing nothing wrong, their mind begins to race about the



possibilities of giving the wrong answer. By default this makes them a criminal. Although the drugs belonged to Travis, and I had no idea they were in the car, the burden would fall on me to prove they were legit. Children learn this lesson early on when the entire class gets punished for the kid who brings gum to class. It is an unfair system, one that breeds animosity, bitterness, and general distrust of any person employed in human resources, but I was not going to give that speech. This cop was polished, direct, by the book, and worst, witty.

“There vitamins, officer,” I blurted out. “Just vitamins.”

Using his left hand, he slowly removed his sunglasses and proceeded to give me the look, the look you give when you know somebody is lying but you are giving them the benefit of doubt. “Vitamins?”

“I’m sort of a health nut,” said Travis.

“Really? – a nut?” The cop rubbed his neck and sighed. “It’s Sunday boys. I don’t need this.”

Travis trembled and looked at me with dread.

“Go on,” I said. “Hand them over.”

Letting out a wincing sound, I watched as Travis’s arm extended across my chest and out the window where he dropped the pill bottle into the cop’s hand. The lawman studied it and unscrewed the lid. “Now, this is amazing.”

“Is there a problem, officer?” I asked.

“It seems that your bottle of vitamins has magically transformed into Percocet, Darvon, and if I’m not mistaken, Molly.”

“Are those vitamins?” I asked.

“No, sir. No there not. These are highly powerful prescription drugs, and the Molly, well, that’s just against the law, period.”

“Officer I can explain,” interrupted Travis, leaning over. “Those belong to my girlfriend. She’s got a bad back and some other things.”

“Well, that’s not good, sir. I hate to hear that, but what are you doing with them? You do know its against the law to transport prohibited pharmaceuticals unless you’re a proxy or legal guardian, and the Molly?”

Travis sunk back into his seat.

“Officer,” I asked, volunteering the question, “are we in any trouble?”

“Let me see your driver’s license, registration, and insurance.”

Reaching up, I lowered the visor, and pulled down the rental agreement tucked against the ceiling. Handing it over, the cop carried the paperwork back to his car.

“We’re deep in it. So deep I can smell it,” said Travis.

My mind drifted back to a time when I sat staring at a large, menacing man.

FLASH BACK TO:

INT. – COFFEE SHOP – THREE WEEKS EARLY -  
DAY

“So what you got for me, T-Spoon?”

“Don’t know and don’t want to. I’m only the messenger.” T-Spoon was not your stereotypical

henchman. He had broad shoulders and a barrel chest, but his arms were long and slim as though he had missed a gene or two on the latter to evolution. Reaching into his sports coat pocket, he handed over an envelope.

Unnerved, I yanked it and ripped the seal. I paused on the letter.

“Bad news?” asked T-Spoon.

“I’m going to Kansas.”

“Good for you.”

“Why good for me?” T-Spoon stood up. He turned and started to walk away. “Why good for me?” I asked again, brave but naive.

He stopped and looked sternly at me. “Why not? You got a problem with Kansas?”

BACK TO PRESENT:

EXT. HIGHWAY - 2:41 P.M.

“Thank you, officer,” I said, taking my license and tucking the paperwork up behind the visor.

“Yeah, everything checks out, except one thing, these.”

It was the pills and for effect, he shook the bottle.

The dutiful cop had pulled a fast one, and my sleep deprivation had turned an enemy. Many a criminal had been brought down for less, but what a pitiful way to go. What should have been a routine traffic stop had turned into a devilish nightmare pitting our misfortune against his sacred oath.

“Is there anything we can do?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

Our spirits lifted.

“I’ll cut you a break if you help me.”

Our spirits dropped.

EXT. SUBURB – 3:13 P.M.

With our friendly cruiser in tow, Travis directed me to an upper, middle income suburb on the west side of the city. For guys like Travis and me, it was the inside of the college brochure, the

crème de la crème, the reason for long nights, of cramming on coffee and brain dope, and doing whatever it takes to stick that piece of paper on the wall that makes you eligible for the best jobs money can buy.

“Right up here,” said Travis.

I turned onto a street lined with canopy trees and cool shadows. He pointed to a brick house with dark shutters. An antique silver sports car was parked in the driveway. It was a British car, a sign of culture and prestige.

Finding a spot, I pulled over and waited. The police cruiser parked a few feet behind us, and before we had time to fully take in our surroundings, the cop had jumped out and was at my open window. “Which one is it?” he asked.

“That one,” replied Travis.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Are you positive?”

“That one!”

A look of concern came over the cop’s face.

He was puzzled, and inside I was too. Rubbing his jaw he said, "I would have never suspected it would be here? You sure you're not confused?"

"Can we leave?" asked Travis.

"Yeah, I guess. I need a warrant before I can do anything."

"Then let's go."

Travis waved me on as if I were his private chauffeur.

"Hey!" shouted the cop. "Hold on." I braked. The cop leaned down and looked sternly into the car. "Remember, I got both your names."

With a nod and understanding, I eased up on the brake, and we were off.

INT. CAR - 3:21 P.M.

"What was that back there?" I asked.

"Do I have to wear this?" asked Travis, adjusting the blindfold to cover his eyes.

"Yes. You gonna tell me?"

Travis pushed the blind fold up over his left

eye and stared at me. "That was payback."

"For what?"

"Bad grade."

"Who was that?"

"Prof. Mullins."

"You turned Mullins in for a bad grade. Are you an idiot?"

"They'll want you to testify."

"They won't want anything. University won't want the exposure."

"Does he deal?"

"No, I don't think."

"Then why on Earth would you tell the cops to go search a guy's home who doesn't deal?"

"And, why would I tell them to search a guy's home who does?"

I had to admit. Travis had me.

INT. CAR – 3:32 P.M.

Travis insisted that I give details about what happened the day before in Kansas, but it was not



something I liked talking about. Killing people for money was not something I wanted to share. It was not like sharing a joke or way to cheat on an exam, but Travis was not your average persistent person. He kept at me until I caved. “He liked good wine and had kids. That’s all I know, and that’s too much for you.”

“They don’t give you any details?” asked Travis.

“That’s not how it works,” I replied. “They tell me where to go, and I go. It’s like dropping off a pizza.”

Travis flashed a devilish grin. He was proud of himself for prying it out of me. “How’d you do it?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“You already know too much. Technically you’re an accessory.”

“Are you a lawyer?”

I frowned at the profane logic and asked, “What happened back there? Why did you do that?”

“Mullins deserved it. He screwed me. He said

if I hooked him up with a girl he'd let me slide."

"And, that gave you a right to turn him in for something he didn't do?"

"Hey!" exclaimed Travis. "The guy did me, alright! He gave it to me, and I didn't like it! He said if I hooked him up he'd give me a C or something. Instead he gave me an F. Do you know what that did to my GPA?"

"Yeah, you'd have to sign back up and take the class over. I've done it. They remove the F when you pass the class."

Travis scoffed at my reply. "You're a joke."

"I'm a joke? Travis, you just ruined a guy's career if he's lucky because you were too lazy to figure out how the system works to fix your own problem!"

"Yeah, well you're not me, okay. I'm not as smart as you, and don't give me this self-righteous treatment about how you're somewhat better. The guys you work for solve problems by killing people. Hitler did that too!"

"You're saying I'm Hitler?"

“No,” replied Travis.

“Then why did you say that?”

“Cause you needed to hear it.”

“For starters, what I do isn’t what Hitler did.”

“How’s it any different? You have a problem with someone you kill them. Sounds pretty Hitlerish to me.”

“That’s not how it is.”

“And, so you’re telling me, because your not throwing them into flaming ovens you’re somehow not doing the same thing? How many lies you got to tell yourself to rise out of bed in the morning? I tell you man, you have got some twisted ethics in your mind.”

I gripped the steering wheel with such violent rage that my veins were on the verge of busting out of my hands, but in my heart, a moment a rationality took hold. The anger in his voice was warranted. However, it needed to be tempered. “Epictetus.”

“Is that a venereal disease?”

“If it were I’m surprised you didn’t know,” I

replied.

Travis grinned.

“He was a philosopher. He came up with the idea that you can’t change what is.”

“Can’t change what is?” questioned Travis.

“That’s right. Things are what they are, and you can’t change what is.”

“So you’re telling me that murder is okay?”

Disgusted, Travis slouched back against the door where he took a few seconds to recoil before he reached out and whacked the dash with his fist.

“Hey! Don’t do that! I have to return this!”

Defying my command, Travis hit the dash again. “You mean somebody actually came up with that to justify their bad behavior? It sounds like something you’d get out of a fortune cookie!”

“Actually, it is something I’ve gotten out of a fortune cookie.” Travis violently hit the dash one more time just to prove he could. “Please,” I said, in a calm, lowered voice, “Stop hitting the dash.”

EXT. MOBILE HOME - 4:07 P.M.

A relic from the 1980's, Royce's mobile home was the type that overused cheap aluminum to make gaudy fixtures like fake shutters and arching curves. What paint was left was so faded, that all the browns that made up the trim had turn to bologna pink and the main coat of white was nothing but chalk with a tinge of green made possible by a constant glazing of orgasmic plant matter from the high weeds and woods that surrounded it.

Travis found a note on the door. It read, "Back in two hours if back at all."

"Perfect." he chuckled. "It doesn't get any better."

Opening the door, I stepped out into the humid day and scanned the horizon. We were so far away from civilization, not even the hum of the interstate could be heard and in every direction their was nothing but blue sky and tracer trails from jets.

Travis walked up with the note in hand. He was dripping sweat, as I was too. Misery is summer

in Missouri. "What do we do now? Stay or drown?"

"We'll just wait," I replied.

"Wait? Why are we waiting? We could go back into the city. I know people."

"If you knew people, which I know you don't, you'd already called them. Royce will be here." I sat down in the car to get relief.

"Awe, this is bull!" stomped Travis. "We're out in the middle of nowhere, sweating our balls off, waiting on some weirdo whose wanted for running some porn site!"

"He never said it was porn."

"It doesn't matter," commented Travis. "We could be doing something else."

"Yeah, like going to the cops and telling them that you lost the credit card you stole and copied. They got a name for what you did, man."

"Yeah, and they got one for what you're doin' too, and their not going to consult a dead philosopher to find out if it's legal."

We were beginning to bite at each other's throat. Ever since the traffic stop something had

changed, a dark mood had settled over the car. Travis had been on edge, and I had been trying to recover from an adrenaline high that was made all the more apparent by a lack of sleep. In an odd way, it was good that we were arguing, it was keeping me awake.

“Let’s just relax,” I said, calmly. “We both know this isn’t good. Royce will be here.”

“But when?” begged Travis.

“I don’t know. I’m not a predictor. If I were, we wouldn’t be here!”

Since I had been making my runs, I had learned not to deal with people who were still learning. My employer had given me a number to call, and that was what I stuck to. If I got lost, I did not use a GPS. If I broke down, I did not call a tow truck. And, on those occasions when I had to call, I was to the point of never saying too much nor too little.

Inside Travis knew I was right. We could go back into the city and make a few calls, but it would be a waste of time. All it would accomplish would be

a lot of false promises and dead ends. No, what Travis needed was a specialist, a person who did not second guess every move because he already knew the move.

A big problem that people have breaking the law, especially people who are paid to break the law, is that they do not appreciate their employer's wisdom and in turn, prove they do not understand their own. I was fully aware that if I messed up it would not be the big goon T-Spoon coming after me. It would be something much worse, something that would not sit down for a cup of coffee.

Travis knew people, but a frat buddy who knew how to download torrents anonymously or hack the school server was not doing anything that half a million other tech savvy kids groomed on free wifi and unlimited data could not do.

Royce, on the other hand, was a techno-genius. He could tunnel. He could hop on nodes, bypassing systems to access the under-Net, a digital world off limits to most, a world requiring a guide, and we were going to wait for our digital Virgil to



hold our hand as we abandoned all hope and entered into the viper pit of the cyber world. I was fading in and out; the heat was not helping. I turned the air conditioner to high and to catch some sleep, I climbed into the back seat of car while Travis took a crow's nest view on the trunk. What to me seemed to a be a few hours, was confirmed by my watch to be only a few minutes. Maybe it was the conversation, maybe the anxiety of the situation, but when I opened my eyes, I heard Royce's voice asking Travis, "Does he always talk in his sleep?"

#### INT. MOBILE HOME – LATER – SAME DAY

Surprisingly, the inside of Royce's mobile home was nothing like the outside. The furniture was all neatly arranged, some of it new or almost, and the walls were lined with bookshelves that contained hundreds of books, many of which focused on subjects related to computers, hacktivism, economics, and one complete section on cooking.

Royce enjoyed a pipe, and the entire place had the aroma of apple cinnamon. A small fluffy cat, pleased and purring, had curled up in the corner and paid us no attention. Royce smiled pleasantly and took a seat in a recliner. The entire, peaceful mood made me sleepy, and I wanted to lie down, and to do so, I spread myself out on a couch, but Travis was too hopped up to sit. He studied the bookshelves and pulled out a book. "You an anarchist?"

"At this point in my life, I'm many things," replied Royce, clicking the pipe in his teeth.

Royce looked to be about forty or maybe forty-five, with dark hair, clean complexion, and slim build. It was the best guess any one could make given that, aside from living in squalor, he had kept up his appearance and had the manners of a fine English gentleman, a sure sign that once in his life he enjoyed a posh existence and somewhere out there, far beyond the hills of Missouri, he had friends who looked at his criminal pursuits as a skill to be admired.

“So you’re wanted?” asked Travis, sliding the book back into its place.

Royce gave me an odd look and replied with an amusing nod, “That’s what I’m told.”

“Was it porn?” asked Travis. “I don’t really care if it was, but I don’t want to be doing business with a pervert.”

“I can assure you it was not porn, nor am I a deviant. I’m merely a man.” Again, Royce gave me a glance. “What on earth have you told him about me?”

I raised up from the couch. “Look, Royce, we need some help. Travis needs to find a credit card.”

“Of whom and why?”

“It’s a long story,” said Travis.

“It’s a long drive back into St. Louis,” reminded Royce, sharply and to the point. “I don’t pull hustles, and I don’t like people who judge me.”

“Listen,” said Travis. “The card belonged to a friend.”

“And you stole it,” surmised Royce.

“Sort of.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’re much of a friend. I suggest you count your losses, and leave your friend alone.” Royce stood and shrugged us off. “What good is all the education in the world if it produces miserable boys such as yourselves?”

“Can you help us, Royce?” I asked, pleading. “Man, we’re sorry. We just need it.”

“I have never once condemned you, Aaron, but I don’t like hustlers.” Royce took a few steps and paused. “You came to my home and brought him, a young man that accuses me of awful things. Terrible things! Things I find despicable.”

“You got to admit,” said Travis. “You’re situation is strange.”

“My situation is what it is,” said Royce. He moved to the kitchen area where he started messing with the coffee pot. “You young people have been brainwashed to think everybody who can hack is dangerous!” He cringed and sighed before pressing his finger to his brow to relieve the anguish, “No wonder I didn’t agree with academia. Do you have any money?”

“Not at the moment,” said Travis.

“That’s too bad,” said Royce, opening a cabinet and digging for a can of coffee. “Our lives are ruled by moments set in the past.”

Royce closed the cabinet and turned around. He muttered something to himself.

Travis became a ball of rage. “Awe, forget this!” he shouted, storming to the other side of the room. “It’s just a stupid credit card, and she’s not going to say anything!”

“That’s what I thought too,” added Royce. “I had a lover, a young man from New York who worked in my office. We had this crazy dream that when he completed graduate school, we would run off together and tour the world. At the time I had a pension, a book deal, and an annual income of \$78,000.00 from an offshore website that sold fake bonds.”

“What happen?” asked Travis.

“Everything was good. The semester rolled on. I worked. He studied, and at night we’d cuddle and talk about the future while we sipped Cutty

Stark. And, then, one fine day, right out of the blue, he told me he'd met someone. Can you believe that?"

"He turned you in," I said.

Royce nodded and put his head down.

"Well ain't this something special," added Travis, standing and beginning to dance around in a circle with his finger waving like a spoiled child. "You got a secret. I got a secret. We all got big secrets."

"Shut up, and sit down!" I ordered.

Travis peered at me with contempt and scorn.

Royce had done it. He had told one of those tales that made you think about your own decisions, what you could have done different to avoid the crash if only you had been able to see what was coming up around the curve. As I looked at Royce, he was wiping a tear, but when I turned to Travis, he was biting back a fight. If he could punch me, he would, and I shifted the argument in his favor.

"You don't deserve this, Royce."

"Don't mess with me, Aaron. I've had too

much for one visit. Either pay me my money, or get out.”

I looked at Travis. He anxiously tapped his foot against the floor and slammed his fist into his hand. He stood up. “All I got is a few hundred and some ones.”

Royce reached out and yanked Travis’s wallet from his hand. “I thought you were broke? There must be a thousand dollars in here.” Royce plucked out a few more bills and pulled out a credit card from an inner sleeve. “This,” he said, holding up the card between his fingers, “is for being a sneaky person.

“Sneaky?” questioned Travis. “You’re a thief!”

“I’m Robin Hood!” replied Royce. He placed the wallet back into Travis’s palm and winked.

INT. CAR - 5:12 P.M.

In the amount of time it would have taken a metro cop to look up my record, Royce had already managed to trace down the last use of Samantha’s

credit card to a B&B near Cape Girardeau. Normally, I did not speed, but following the maximum speed of seventy would take me two hours or so to get there depending on traffic. So I notched it up to eighty-five in the hopes that some maverick in a plain brown wrapper would be after trophies and not scholars such as we.

From his pocket, Travis pulled out his cellphone. Turning on the radio, he rotated the dial to an obscure frequency and with a special feature on his phone, he sent pulsing beats to the receiver. Travis began to contort his neck. A wide, stretching smile consumed his face as he increased the volume. It was tweaker music, techno by design, the kind of stuff that makes you forget your losing your mind when you actually are. Travis did not live on it, but when he was gaining an emotional high or peaking out, he used it to vent. To him, this little jaunt off through the country was not a hassle, it was a right of passage, something that had to be done to affirm his dominance as an alpha male.

Watching him, enjoying the gift of



technology, I could not help but analyze the irony. Here beside me, relaxed in leather and new car fragrance, was this young man, who upon completion of his degree, was expected to take all he had learned and make the world a better place. Every college student gets that speech, a gratis push for independence combined with a mission statement. Graduations are made for them, a way for those who think they are smart to test themselves among the peasants.

Having this realization, a question came to my mind. What would Travis, a well-to-do-small time pimp from a sweet, All-American family, do when his talents were unleashed upon the world? Would he use the same mind that helped him, and millions of his peers, download the illegal music we were listening to for good or would he continue on with the mindset that everybody else is doing it and by adopting that belief hold true to what he was at the moment?

In America, your world changes when you turn eighteen. Overnight, all you had been doing

previously takes on a whole new responsibility as prison becomes a real possibility. From that point on your on your own. What you choose to do is between you, your conscious, and the magic pen. Still, your expected to go off to a fine school, pick a career, a husband or wife, and above all else a respectable future while at the same time staying pure and innocent.

In thirty years, when Travis is gaining on his retirement, and I'm hopefully not in the same boat as Royce, what would Travis be doing? Would he be gouging investors out of their savings by use of loopholes which despite not being very ethical are nonetheless legal, or would he be using his time to go to work and happy that he is still in the game?

"Probably not," said Travis. "Yeah, well, were almost to Cape so I need to go."

I grabbed the phone from his ear and through it to the floorboard. "No calls!"

The car became silent. For the next few miles Travis said nothing while I kept a look out for police cars hiding on the sides of the highway.

“What’s it going to be like, Aaron?”

“Not sure,” I replied. “This thing isn’t properly planned.” I turned and looked at him. His head was tilted to the side, stuck in that place where you want to speak but cannot. “I usually don’t think about it,” I continued. “I mean, why would I? Every place is different.”

“Does it bother you taking someone’s life?”

It was a question I had never been asked before. No one had ever even dared, and the only thing I could think of was why do people ask such stupid questions when they are preparing to do the inevitable? Travis’s face displayed a draining expression, and it was unnerving.

EXT. BED AND BREAKFAST - 141 MINUTES  
LATER.

As I had mentally pictured it, the B&B was a quaint place, a yellow Victorian home that was surrounded by tall trees and skirted by a whitewashed wrap around porch. It was located in a

part of the city that was being rediscovered with grant money used to drive out the impoverished. What few old homes remained were either boarded up or being renovated. The B&B had Gothic trim that included trace elements of stained glass that had been used to enhance the exterior, and the grounds were complimented by a variety of plants, some of which included: Rose of Sharon, Trailing Verbena, and an assortment of roses.

Parking the car on the street, I opened the door and stepped out. The air was clean, some of the cleanest I had ever smelt. The sky above was clear, fading into an amber orange to the west. A few stars were beginning to show in the burgeoning blue to the east, and some birds that had not taken the hint to nest were chirping in the trees.

“It’s good to know the women I date have class,” said Travis, proudly rising from his seat and taking a good look around.

Making our way to the house, we were greeted by a little pooch who had been spying on us from the bushes. He began to bark wildly and before we

had a chance to try and make friends, the door opened and a grandfather figure stepped out, “Ah, I see you’ve met, Bogart.” He closed the door and came to make our acquaintance. “I’m John Marthow, the owner and you must be late.”

“We’re just passing through, sir,” I said, “on our way to Florida. My aunt stayed here a few months ago, and she said that we should stop by if we needed a room.”

“Well, to be quite honest, we don’t book rooms on the fly. We go by reservations only.”

“I see. I was unaware and would have called ahead, but my Aunt said it was a great stay, and I figured why not.”

“We do get a lot of that,” chuckled John, in a polite but arrogant manner. “Who did you say you were again?”

“I’m Mark and this is Pat.”

“Mark and Pat,” repeated John, rocking on his heels. He pondered a thought for a moment then boosted himself. “Well, I can’t offer you a room, but I can show you around if you’d like.”

“That would be nice,” I replied. We walked to the house. “I taught history for twenty-eight years in Wyoming,” said John. “This is my dream home.”

“It’s nice,” I commented. “I really like what you’ve done to it.” “Yes, yes, it is nice. My wife passed away a few years ago. She’d love it too.”

Both Travis and I found John to be a wise old sage, telling stories about his adventures in South America, his wild nights in Mexico as a fraternity brother, how as youth he once hopped a train and broke his leg jumping off, and just before entering college his girlfriend, a small Nebraskan farm girl with Studebaker curves, had told him she was pregnant but not with his child. He married that girl from the lonely plains, and it was her he could not forget. The son that was born, the son of another man, was there only child, and he left home at eighteen, joined the army, and never again spoke to John, not even at the funeral of his mother. It was a sad state of affairs, and inside, I hated lying to him. I was beginning to question if Royce had given us the correct location, but as we were making

our way to the kitchen, Travis caught my attention, “Over your left shoulder,” he whispered, “out the window.”

With a slowness so as not to raise suspicion, I took a glance. In a tire swing was our girl. Immediately, I took action, pretending to check my phone and also the time. “Mr. Marthow, it’s great. You have a very lovely place here. Thank you for showing us around.”

Remembering a person’s last name is one of the best lessons I was ever taught, and as we hurried toward the car, I could still see John’s face glowing as if I had done something magical. Travis too was amazed but for a different reason. As we walk away from the house, we were not even to the car before he asked, “Where are we going?”

“We’ll, wait until dark. She’s not going anywhere.”

EXT. CAR - 9:27 P.M.

After leaving the B&B, Travis and I took a few hours to check out the city. Cape Girardeau had the

reputation for being a cozy college town, a place where kids from St. Louis could go to school and escape the hustle and bustle of big time city life. I was hungry and grabbed a few burritos at a small stand that catered to the bar crowd. I offered to buy Travis food, but he would not eat. He was thirsty, and he procured a six pack of beer along with an assortment of tiny bottles filled with various alcohols. Following the adage – Beer before liquor, never sicker. Liquor before beer, have no fear. – Travis began to slam back the smaller portions before moving onto the beer. However, the minor effects did not take long to manifest, and I watched him go from slamming to slurping, from laughing at everything to a numb, expressionless daze that ended in a nap.

My first thought was to hit the interstate and go back to St. Louis to forget about the entire thing and let Travis find a way out on his own. That would have been the rational thing to do. There had been lots of times, especially when I first started in the business, of getting half way to a job and wanting to



bail out, but if I did, I would not just have to pay my employer, I would also have myself to face. Everybody I had been taught to admire, to aspire to be, had taken on serious risks. If I could not meet a challenge head on, there was no telling what I might back out of later, and then, there was also an obvious fact that kept tugging at my ethical core. Travis was my best friend.

EXT. CAR - 10:02 P.M.

Close to the B&B was an access drive to a field, taking advantage of the seclusion, I pulled in. Travis was still asleep. Waking him would have been futile and taking him a long would cost valuable time as the liquor coursing through his veins would have made him an unstable crime companion. The trick, I told myself, was to get in and out as clean as possible, not as quickly as possible. Fools rush in, but I was no fool. I convinced myself I was merely picking something up for somebody and approached the job with that strategy in mind.

Reaching down, I brought up a pair of latex gloves from beneath the seat and after giving them a few shakes, I blew into each one in order to make them fit my oily hands.

Travis was still asleep and had never before seen me go through my ritual, and in doing it, it occurred to me that he might not have been so eager to tag along had he known how I did it. There was something that changed when you got to the point of actually putting on the gloves that did not exist before. Travis could hustle girls and score party drugs, but preparing to possibly kill someone or at least maim them, was something that took a stomach. Simply holding a gun on someone could make you a nervous wreck especially when the person too had a weapon which I hoped would not be the case. Not everyone can do what I was preparing to do, and even though I was not planning on getting dirty, thinking the mission would play out with only tears and a gleeful gaining of the credit card, I still was not going to take the chance on asking Travis to follow me in, and part

me was grateful he had passed out.

With the gloves on, all that was left was to retrieve the gun that I kept in the trunk. I looked at Travis. He was completely gone. He was what they call, toast. Not saying a word. I was on my own, and as I opened the door I stood up into the darkest night I had ever seen. Then it hit me, an odor so foul, so disgusting, that it could only mean one thing – rotten potatoes.

#### INT. BED AND BREAKFAST – CONTINUOUS

I made my way toward the house, the gun clinched low in my right hand, and my eyes transfixed on the door. In this state of tunnel vision, objects such as trees and shrubs moved past as if I were a cameraman on a dolly track who personally used his own eyes as the lens. Even as I entered the yard, making my way to the porch, I never stopped to check my surroundings. My senses were doing it for me, working in the background as a biological radar, and keeping me abreast of any changes that

may impair my mission.

Pleased, I found the door was unlocked. It told me two things. First, the area had little to no criminal activity, and second, John did not live at the house. He was kind but would have never left the door unlocked.

As I slipped inside and closed the door, I found myself walking through a dimly lit, majestic palace of a forgotten time.

“Who are you?” I heard a voice ask. I froze. The voice was clear but oddly familiar. “Gary?” My heart began to pound. “Did you say, Gary or Jerry? I can’t make out a word you’re sayin’.”

Carefully I slipped further into the shadows where I could hug a wall and figure out where the voice was coming from.

“Man, I’m in the middle of nowhere,” the voice said. “We got a bad signal or something. I can’t make out a word you’re sayin’. Let me step outside.” Without warning, a tall man passed right in front of me, but who or what he looked like was kept a mystery as the room shed light on his

features. "Let me see if I can get you out here," the man continued, opening the door and stepping out to the porch.

The next sound I heard was his laughing and bragging. The signal must have took hold, but panic had placed a firm hand on my chest. What remained was a muffled conversation and racing thumping of my heartbeat which was quickly causing me to break into a sweat. For sure it was a tight jam, one of the worst I had ever been in, and doing it for friendship seemed less appealing then cold, hard cash.

Checking in both directions, I determined I could pass through the room without being noticed, and it was not long before I came to a flight of stairs that led to the top floor containing a series of guests rooms.

No sooner had my right foot pressed down on the first step, that I heard a door from a room above open and watched as yet another shadow pass but this time from one room to the next. I inspected my gun. Suddenly, the door behind me, the door

leading to the porch, opened.

“You don’t say,” said the voice of the man on the phone.

Fright rushed upon me. I did not hesitate and bolted up the stairs where I found myself clinging to a creaky banister, using my place as a temporary lookout. My mind was awash with thoughts, mainly reminding me of how stupid I was for going through with what was appearing to be a suicide mission. However, before I could make my next move or have a talk with myself, another door opened and caught me off guard. It was the girl, the girl from the restaurant, the girl who had stolen the credit card. She started to scream, but I rushed her and placing my hand over her mouth, pushed her into the room. She started to kick, and I held her tightly.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I whispered, “but you have something that belongs to a friend of mine.”

Kicking at me, she came within inches of popping me with a solid groin shot, but I blocked

her and repeated, "I don't want to hurt you. I only want the credit card." Something must have snapped in her mind for at that moment our eyes met. Almost instantly, she became aware and her tension eased but did not diminish. "Show me where it is, and I'll be leaving." She pointed to an antique dresser on the other side of the room. "Go get it," I said, releasing her, "but don't scream."

Though she was nervous, she left me and hurried to a dresser where she pulled out a jewelry drawer and grabbed the wallet contained within. "I never meant to harm, Travis," she said. I checked the wallet and confirmed the card was inside. "We only used it once," she continued.

Satisfied and ready to leave, a high pitch voice with a shrill sound tingled up my spine as it said, "We should go down to that porno store we saw on the way in."

I turned and nearly fainted. Standing before me was the short man from the restaurant. He was wearing a large cowboy hat, a pair of leather chaps, and a gunfighter's belt complete with two silver

pistols. The pistols never registered, but his naked appearance overpowered my mind. The dread and apprehension must have flushed my face a pale, ghost white as nothing appealed to me more than chucking him to the side and escaping the house.

Not wanting to see any more, I lunged forward and started to the staircase, but, as I was, he pulled one of the silver pistols from its holster and opened fire on me. The bullet whizzed past my head and lodged itself in a wall. By now, I was in such a hurry that nothing could stop me, and that's when it happened. The door leading out to the porch opened, and I saw Frank, the pervert from the cafe.

“Hey! What is this?” asked Frank.

He had barely gotten out his words when a bullet, fired from behind me, removed half his face. Frank hung in midair for a few seconds before falling backwards.

Surprised, I paused. All that was left of his disgusting smile was a few rotten teeth and mangled tongue. I looked at the phone still clinched in his



hand. He had been reviewing images stored on his phone. The picture he had been viewing was awful, and then I noticed the blood dripping from a wound on my head.

“You like that?” I turned and the tiny gunfighter was grinning. “Do you?” he asked, laughing widely, aiming his gun at me. “Prepare to die, hit man.”

“Not today!” I shouted.

Never in my life had I been so quick to move. In my path lay a pervert with half his face missing and behind me stood a soulless troll with the power to give and take life at will. All I could do was run.

He fired again, and not sparing any thought on it, I used Frank’s lifeless body to gain some leverage and catapulted myself through the open door and out onto the porch where I proceeded to take off in a sprint to the car. To his credit, the short man tried to follow, but due to the anatomical limitations of his overly fleshy legs, he was not able to achieve his goal and quickly ran out of breath and hunched over in a pant.

Once back at the car, I opened the door quickly, plopped into the seat, and with my gloves still on, I jammed the key into the ignition. The sound of the engine woke Travis. Somehow, he had remained in a peaceful sleep throughout the banging ordeal. He yawned, stretched, and said, “Okay, let’s do this.”

THE END

“The Up Down Scholars” (Written in 2015.  
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This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are coincidence.